

## **Planning board supports design for BRAC Metro project in Bethesda**

Design calls for pedestrian underpass, elevators at Rockville Pike

by Sarah Gantz | Staff Writer

The least developed of nine traffic projects called for with the merger of two military hospitals in Bethesda became more concrete Monday, when the Montgomery County Planning Board unanimously supported a design for a Metro access and crossing project along Rockville Pike.

The design, estimated to cost between \$48 million and \$58 million, would give commuters to the new Walter Reed Military Medical Center better access to the Medical Center Metro station, on the other side of the road, with high speed elevators and a pedestrian tunnel. The design, one of four options that ranged in price from \$1 million to \$70 million, is favored by a group of stakeholders and was recommended by planning board staff.

The planning board supported the design with a recommendation that planners review possible improvements to the street crossing, after hearing from people who live near the station, who said the tunnel and elevators would not eliminate those who walk across Rockville Pike.

"I think finally they're looking at the big picture," said Deborah Michaels, who was among the neighbors who spoke at Monday's hearing.

Michaels represents the Coalition of Military Medical Center Neighbors and the Glenbrook Village Homeowners Association on the Base Realignment and Closure Implementation Committee, a group that oversees the traffic projects related to the hospital merger.

### **What's next**

National Naval Medical Center, in Bethesda, and Walter Reed Army Medical Center are federally mandated to merge by September. The move is expected to increase by one-third the number of employees, to 10,500, and to double the number of annual visits to the campus to 1 million.

Four intersection projects, sidewalk and bicycle path improvements and the Metro access project are planned to address the increase in traffic and were to be completed for the facility's opening.

Of those projects, only the sidewalk and bicycle paths will be completed by the county Department of Transportation in time.

Timelines say April 2012 is the earliest the first of the intersection projects could be completed.

The Metro access project is the farthest from completion.

The favored design calls for high speed elevators that would connect street level to Metro platforms and a pedestrian tunnel that would connect both sides of Rockville Pike.

Other options included minor improvements at existing crossings, a pedestrian underpass without elevators, and a road renovation that would create a street-level pedestrian overpass to Rockville Pike.

The planning staff recommend the underpass and elevators because they thought that option was most successful in improving access to the Metro, pedestrian safety and commute time, said Larry Cole, a master planner with the county.

There are about 2,500 pedestrian crossings at the site per weekday, according to a presentation by planning board staff Monday.

#### Planning and paying

The design was supported by 10 stakeholder agencies: the county and state departments of transportation, the state and federal highway administrations, the Department of Defense, Navy Med, the National Institutes of Health, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the National Capital Planning Commission and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

Those agencies will decide who will pay for and build the project, said Phil Alperson, the county's BRAC coordinator.

The Department of Defense has set aside \$20 million for the Metro project, but that will not cover the cost.

The county and state have struggled to secure federal funding to pay for the federally mandated hospital move.

The best bet, Alperson said, is \$300 million in the House version of the fiscal 2011 appropriations bill that would be put toward traffic improvements around BRAC affected military hospitals. That line item is not in the Senate's version, but Alperson is hopeful.

"If we don't get all the funding now, it doesn't mean the search is over. We'll keep doing this for as long as it takes," he said. "We're not going to stop looking."